



Let's start the conversation – Opinion Piece by Caroline Wells, CEO.

Every day we read or hear more about the so-called 'sugar tax' or, as it should be more appropriately termed, a 'health levy on sugar sweetened beverages'.

We have heard arguments from government and health experts both in favour of, and opposed to this 'tax', so let's broaden this conversation and ask our community their view

As CEO of one of the state's leading health charities I support our State Government's goal to make Tasmania the healthiest population by 2025 and the Healthy Tasmania Five Year Strategic Plan, with its focus on reducing obesity and smoking.

However, it is only one tool in the tool box to help us achieve the vision of the healthiest population and it is not the only point we should be considering. A health levy on sugary drinks should be viewed as just one of the tools to be utilised as part of a holistic approach to dealing with the obesity epidemic. Our approach should include strategies such as restricting the marketing of unhealthy food to children and limiting the sale of unhealthy food and drink products at schools and other public institutions together with effective public education campaigns. Some of these strategies are already in progress to include in our toolbox.

We all have to take some individual responsibility for the choices we make but as health leaders and decision makers we also have a responsibility to create an environment where healthy choices are made easier. This, in my opinion, is not nannyism but just sensible policy and demonstrable leadership which will positively affect the health of our population. This sentiment about leadership echoes Graeme Lynch's comments in Talking Point (16 March 2017) regarding the establishment of a statewide Food and Nutrition Coalition, an initiative fully supported by Diabetes Tasmania.



So why target sugary drinks?

Manufacturers tell us that there are many foods in the marketplace that will contribute to weight gain and we should focus more on the broader debate about diet and exercise, but we know this is not working. Again it comes back to my initial point, that in order to make a real difference to the obesity epidemic we need more than one tool in our tool box.

By now it is well known that sugary drinks are energy dense and nutrient poor. A recent Cancer Council study found that 17 per cent of male teens drank at least one litre of soft drink a week – this equates to at least 5.2kg of extra sugar per year. Is this really a necessary part of their diet? In fact, evidence indicates a significant relationship between the amount and frequency of sugar sweetened beverages consumed and an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes.

We already 45,000 people at high risk of type 2 diabetes in Tasmania. Do we really want to say we contributed to a rise in this figure by not implementing strategies available to us that would make a difference?

I recall being quite moved last year when the then UK Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne said, despite strong opposition from within his own party, that he wouldn't be doing his job if he didn't act on reducing the impact of sugary drinks.

“I am not prepared to look back at my time here in this Parliament, doing this job and say to my children's generation... I'm sorry. We knew there was a problem with sugary drinks.....But we ducked the difficult decisions and we did nothing.”

Don't we want to leave a better legacy for our children? We have to act. Australia is lagging behind the rest of the world in this area. The UK's levy on sugar sweetened beverages will commence in 2018, with revenue raised to go toward funding programs to reduce obesity and encourage physical activity and healthy eating for school children.



We know unhealthy food is cheaper and that despite best efforts by many Australians to make healthier choices price does ultimately affect our decisions as to what we buy. In Mexico a tax of just one peso a litre (less than 7¢) on sugary drinks cut annual consumption by 9.7 per cent and raised an estimated at \$1.4 billion in revenue. Similarly, the 2011 French levy has decreased consumption of sugary drinks, particularly amongst younger people and low income groups. These are just two international examples regarding the successful introduction of a levy on sugary drinks.

The addition of a health levy on sugar sweetened beverages to our toolbox is not going to be a panacea and solve all problems nor should it be considered as such, but as part of a coordinated and multi-faceted approach I believe we can effect change. Sixty nine per cent of Australian grocery buyers agree with me...so let's start the conversation, and aim to make a difference in our lifetime.

